When I first became a drug court judge in 1994, I immediately sensed that drug court graduation ceremonies would become a key part of the Los Angeles Drug Court Program. It was obvious that drug court graduations could be used to capture the public's interest and garner favorable media publicity. Moreover, I knew that everyone would like an event that tells a story about a person transforming his or her life from one of drug addiction and desperation to a life of being drug-free and hope for the future.

The emotional appeal of a drug court graduation is difficult to describe or to put into words. All of the drug court graduations I have presided over and attended have always touched my heart. Friends and relatives in the audience seem to simultaneously cry and cheer for the drug court graduates who have successfully completed a year of intensive drug treatment. In short, the drug court graduation is the "Super Bowl," "NBA finals," and "World Series" all rolled into one.

In order to enhance the considerable impact of a drug court graduation on everyone involved, I have chosen to have speakers who are successful such as entertainers, athletes, politicians and business and community leaders to appear at drug court graduations. In addition, the L.A. drug court program has had many speakers appear who are themselves "recovering addicts" and, therefore, better able to relate to the struggles of the drug court graduates. Previous drug court graduation speakers for the L.A. Drug Court Program have included actors James Caan and John Larroquette; Los Angeles County Sheriff Sherman Block- Los Angeles Chief of Police Bernard Parks; Cardinal Roger Mahony, former boxing champion Aaron Pryor; singer/songwriter Paul Williams; Screenwriter/author Jerry Stahl, singer/songwriter Steve Earle; Dallas Taylor, Musician/drummer of Crosby, Stills and Nash; Los Angeles County Public Defender Michael Judge, presiding Judge Veronica S. McBeth; And Gerald Chamales, successful businessman and owner of Omni Computer Products.
After the 1st drug court graduation in May 1995, which featured actor and recovering alcoholic John Larroquette, I recognized that drug court graduations could be utilized to accomplish significant goals for the drug court program. First and foremost, the drug court graduation ceremony was an opportunity to build stronger support among the criminal justice agencies, which are partners in the drug court program. Both Sheriff Sherman Blockand and L.A.P.D. Police Chief Bernard Parks became public supporters of the drug court program once they had experienced a drug court graduation. With the help of these law enforcement officials, the L.A. drug court program achieved greater cooperation from the sheriff's department which provides a custody treatment module within the jail.

The status of a keynote speaker will also influence whether the media will cover your drug court graduation ceremony. While the real story at a drug court graduation is the fact that long term drug addicts have accomplished the miraculous goal of becoming drug-free, the fact remains that television, and even the print media, are more likely to cover the story of a drug court graduation if a celebrity is involved. However, the media, like all people who witness drug court graduations, become immediate converts once they see the special human interest story that each graduate represents.

A drug court graduation should be used to honor the graduates and make them feel extraordinarily special. To this end, drug court gives each graduate a diploma encased in a blue velvet casing and a T-shirt that carries such messages as "Refuse to Abuse" or "Hooked on Recovery." we also select three or four graduation speakers from the graduating drug court class. These graduates who are chosen both for their achievements and their diversity, enthrall the audiences with the stories of their lives. As one drug court graduation speaker recently noted, his address had moved from a two-story brick house in a cul-de-sac to the third cardboard box from the corner when he became a drug addict. The speaker added he no longer lived on the streets because of drug court. Another speaker told the overflowing crowd at his graduation that after being drug-free for a year, he was finally able to see the snowcapped san bernardino mountains which surround Los Angeles. There was also the graduate who told the assemblage in a choke filled voice that he cried when he called his four-year-old
son from jail after being arrested for drug possession and his son asked, "when are you coming home?." Finally, there was the woman drug court graduate who simply held her newly born drug-free baby up for all to see and said this happened because of drug court.

Drug court graduations also honors members of the drug court team who have dedicated themselves to making drug court work. Thus, I have given awards and plaques to drug court counselors, the court administrator, the attorneys who represent both the public defender's and district attorney's office, and members of the law enforcement. It is possible at drug court graduations to put a spotlight on every member of your drug court team. This helps to increase morale among the troops and causes the drug court team to view their work as special.

However, the most singularly important aspect of drug court graduations is the message it sends to those drug court clients who are still trying to finish the program. At the L.A. Drug Court Program, we make a concerted effort to have some of the drug court participants come to a graduation. We believe that by having these regular participants experience a graduation, they will want to work that much harder so that they too will graduate. We also invite former drug court graduates back to our drug court graduations. The presence of these former graduates accomplishes two important goals:

1) The former graduates serve as examples that people can continue to be drug-free after they graduate from the program

2) It allows the drug court program to maintain contact with the drug court graduates and offer them a chance to renew their commitment to the drug court program by joining our alumni association or by using some of the after-care services we offer to graduates of our program.

Before each drug court graduation ceremony, we send out invitations to many of the community leaders, political officeholders, and important members of the criminal justice agencies. Moreover, we also include all of the judges who work in the criminal courts building, as well as those judges who hold leadership positions or are involved in drug court programs. This continuing effort to make the legal community aware of the drug court program has resulted in increased support from my judicial
colleagues. Thus, the drug court graduation process builds institutional support among all segments of the criminal justice community and the public.

My final advice concerning drug court graduations is to have lots of bake sales so that you can raise money to pay for the graduations. Do not be shy about selling your drug court t-shirts whenever the opportunity presents itself. If you witness just one drug court graduation, you will understand the title of this piece and conclude that drug court graduations are the single most important part of the drug court program. You may also be wiping away some tears of joy that come from hearing the poignant stories of these drug addicts who have made a miracle come true for them and their loved ones. The "defining moment" in any drug court graduation is when a drug court graduate steps up to the podium and explains that drug court has given them a new way of life.